

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT AND STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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ABSTRACT

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) will affect many aspects of education for a student with a disability. The standardized tests are not taking into consideration the special needs of these students, and due to schools not meeting the national standards, they are losing a great deal of funding that could be used to acquire more assistance and electronic equipment that would benefit students with disabilities. Most importantly, NCLB might also compromise the individualized education that students with disabilities need and deserve. When students with disabilities lives are changed, so are the teacher's who educate them. Teachers are pressured to find ways to educate their students with disabilities so that when they are tested they are at their appropriate grade level and not going at their own pace. Along with creating daily lesson plans and assignments, teachers are also spending a great deal of time writing Individualized Education Plans (IEP's) for their students with disabilities and are attempting to assist these students with limited money and resources.

On January 8th of 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. Of course there is support from both political parties to create a program that will improve education in the United States. The concept seems simple: give every student a quality education and start holding school districts, schools, and teachers accountable for implementing this ideal. However, actually carrying it out is not that easy. Once

NCLB became a part of daily education there were problems. The high-stakes testing is affecting the daily curriculum; students with disabilities are losing their identities, and teachers are being affected by the changes in the education of students with disabilities.

In 2002 President Bush became the first president to show his belief that each child deserves a *high quality education* (Marshak, 2003). Not only were Republicans in support of this new fed-

eral policy, but Democrats were on board as well. Despite great support in Washington D.C., much public concern exists as to how NCLB is going to affect the education of students today. Many believe that schools have been given an impossible job, and that no matter how well schools across the country perform, many aspects will continuously need improvement (Lewis, 2003). Sixty percent of the public fear that teachers will only teach the material that their students will be tested on, and that there will be less of an emphasis on crucial subjects such as history, science, languages, and the arts (Petersen & Young, 2004). Without an education in all of these subjects, schools will not be graduating well-rounded individuals. On the positive side, praise has been given to the fact that when students are tested they are broken into groups so that no student will be overlooked. If a problem can be identified, it can be rectified. Despite much controversy in the headlines there have been few important legal efforts to change NCLB.

It is vital that parents take time to understand how their child's education will be affected by NCLB, and what they deserve from their school district, school, and teachers. First of all, parents must know that the reason that NCLB was created was an attempt to "close the achievement gap" in the education of students all over the country (Lewis, 2003, p. 57). The focus of NCLB is to improve education in math and reading. Another purpose of NCLB is accountability. The federal mandate holds school districts, schools, and teachers accountable for meeting the government standards, so if students are failing, each school will know where to make changes. This accountability will be monitored through yearly test taking to make sure that students are being taught age-appropriate material and that they are actually making academic prog-

ress. Parents must also know the three primary objectives of NCLB: to increase student learning, decrease student teacher ratios, and to make sure that teachers are qualified.

As stated before, there is a public fear that high-stakes testing is going to cause teachers to only teach the information and subjects that they will be tested on each year (Petersen & Young, 2004). This is a great concern, because who is to say that one subject is more important than another? If only math and reading are being taught in the classroom, students are going to lose out in the *high quality education* that President Bush is trying to create with the use of NCLB (Marshak, 2003). Over the years there has been much research on what actually affects the scores that students achieve on standardized tests. Repeatedly, research has proven that the scores are related more to family characteristics and socioeconomic background than they are to the quality of the education that each student is receiving (Lewis, 2003). Unfortunately, the creators of NCLB must not have seen these findings, because the responsibility of student's achievement is now in the hands of the educators and the administration, not the homes in which these students are growing-up. After students take the test, all the tests are divided into specific subgroups and then graded. These various subgroups include economically disadvantaged, major racial or ethnic groups, students with disabilities, and English language learners. Each group must reach its potential in the classroom.

In order for each school to achieve the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), each subgroup must have an average testing score that meets the government standards. If schools do not meet these standards they will be penalized. If for two years in a row a school does not reach the AYP, the school is labeled as "in need of

improvement.” It is at this point that parents have the option to send their child to another better performing school in their school district, at the district’s expense (Allbritten, Mainzer, & Ziegler, 2004). If for three years in a row a school does not reach the AYP, they must do the same as they had the previous year, in addition to the district providing extra educational services to students with disabilities. If the school fails four years in a row, the above conditions must continue and they must do one of the following: replace the relevant school staff, create a new and improved curriculum, or appoint outside help to advise the school. If the school continues to do poorly for five years in a row they must restructure. This can be done in various ways, such as reopening as a charter school, replacing all or most of the staff, take over of the school’s operations, or changing other major factors that are a part of running the school (Petersen & Young, 2004). With all of these penalties being thrust upon schools for not reaching the AYP each year, schools are losing a great deal of money, money that is needed to create a better education for students to make progress and meet the standards.

No Child Left Behind impacts students nationwide and has the potential to negatively impact students with disabilities. Teachers across the country believe that students with disabilities will learn the material better if their daily instruction is tailored to their individualized needs (McCabe, 2004). A major problem for students with disabilities taking standardized tests is that the individual help they receive daily is not allowed when they take the test. Consequently, these students may be unable to reach their potential on such examinations. According to McCabe (2004), eight out of ten teachers believe that their students with disabilities should be exempted from the yearly exams and

should be given an alternative method to prove the improvement or stagnation of their past year’s education. As stated earlier, in order for a school to meet AYP, all subgroups must meet the standards. However, subgrouping of students with disabilities is failing in many schools. Thus, they are keeping their school from passing, and this is causing schools to spend more money each year. It is feared that the failure to meet AYP each year is going to be blamed on the students with disabilities when they are doing the best they can, despite not being given the adequate assistance they need to succeed. Many of these students have enough hardships in their lives, and the last thing they need is to be blamed for bringing down the success of an entire school.

When the lives of students are altered, so are the lives of the people who educate them. One reason teachers are going to be affected by NCLB is because the policy believes each school has devised a method in order to correct the disability that is hindering students from reaching their full potential (Allbritten, Mainzer, & Ziegler, 2004). If this were possible, then there would be no such word as disability. Instead, there would be a miracle method that allows the student to learn at the appropriate grade level. This issue leads one to consider how NCLB is likely to impact a student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP)s.

An IEP is created by educators and it assists teachers in developing an individualized program for a specific student. Through the IEP, teachers create a daily routine, educational content, and goals that are appropriate for that student’s characteristics. Writing IEPs is labor intensive, however, given the NCLB’s insistence on a single measure to assess progress, the function of the educational plans comes into question. That is to say, if students with disabilities are required to take standardized tests but are denied

access during test taking to the accommodations made within the IEPs, implementing those plans in the classroom becomes futile. In short, under the current language of NCLB, many students with disabilities will not be able to benefit from the accommodations made within their IEPs during test-taking situations. Students with disabilities are capable of learning, but they need assistance in various ways and NCLB should not punish them for what they cannot change. Also, teachers and administrators cannot be blamed when students with disabilities fail to achieve high scores on tests when the assistance needed is not provided on that one test. Another implication of NCLB is the limited resources given to teachers to assist their students, especially the students with disabilities. Many school districts already have low funding and now that most are failing to meet the AYP, the districts have to spend more money to adjust the school and the administration. This results in less technological assistance in the classroom and also with hiring assistants to help in the classroom with all the students, but this could be especially devastating to the students with disabilities. For all these reasons, teachers are being affected by special education which affects the education of the rest of the students in the classroom.

Education is being affected in various ways by NCLB. The first way NCLB is changing schools today is by high-stakes testing that must take place each year. Also, NCLB is causing students with disabilities to lose the individualized instruction that they have been receiving and that they deserve. Finally, since the education of students with disabilities is changing, general educators' classrooms are adjusting to the new expectations that are being put on them by the new regulations of NCLB. CLB's demand for quality education for all students is commendable and

a step in the right direction. Nonetheless, the flaws of the policy will have to be rectified before the benefits of the federal policy reach students from varied cultural backgrounds and abilities.

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